

BLISS SYMBOLS - AN ALTERNATIVE SYMBOL SYSTEM

FOR THE NON-VOCAL PRE-READING CHILD - (Shirley McNaughton)

In this afternoon's discussion I hope to introduce you to the Bliss Symbol system and to show you the similarities and differences between Bliss Symbols and English words. One of the main objectives of the discussion will be to present some of the advantages and disadvantages of Bliss Symbols and to discuss why we are using the Bliss Symbols instead of written English to initiate communication programs with our children. A very common question we are asked is, "Why don't you teach your children to read instead of teaching them the symbols?" The basic reason we have gone the symbol route is that we think it is important that the child be able to communicate as soon as possible. As we will demonstrate later, the Bliss Symbols seem to be easier to pick up than English and the children are communicating sooner. Once they have communication we can work on reading and other skills.

Before we go farther, I would like to give you a little background on the Bliss Symbols. Blissymbolics, also called Semantography, is a symbol system developed by Mr. Charles Bliss as a bridge between meaning and traditional orthography. Mr. Bliss was very concerned about international understanding and was attempting to create an easily learned modern language for communication between all peoples. The symbols were based upon his experience in China during the war. With these symbols he sought to do the same thing for the world that the Chinese written language has done for the people in China: allow people of different spoken dialects to communicate using a common symbolic language. We discovered Bliss Symbols through our efforts to find a communication vehicle for non-vocal, non-reading children and we thought this system might have a potential for use to the young handicapped children. We have adapted this system somewhat in our programs.

The Bliss Symbol Program at the Ontario Crippled Children's Centre is a new program. It started in October of 1971. We are very excited about what we have seen happen in our Centre. We have seen it spreading to other centers in the United States, Canada and overseas. We feel that it is something that people who are interested in non-vocal communication will want to look at. We're not saying it is for every child and we are not saying it fits in every environment. But I think it's an alternative that you should know something about and give consideration to for some children. When you first look at Bliss Symbols I think you have to have the same kind of adventure feeling that you have when you dive into a swimming pool. You have to say to yourself, "I'm going to get into it and find out what it's like," rather than stand back and say, "It looks too complicated, it must be hard to learn." It becomes apparent when you watch the young children using Blissymbolics that it really isn't difficult at all once you get into it.

It is important to note that on every display a child uses, a word always appears under the symbol. We're making it as easy as possible for people who do not know the system to be able to communicate with the child. Thus, the system is not closed as are some signing systems, and anyone who can read can communicate with the child. On the other hand, people who learn the symbols can have a much richer form of communication with the children. As we go through the examples I think you will see how the children can communicate on a greater number of topics and use the symbols in more versatile ways when they are working with people who are familiar with the symbols.

The system itself is entirely visual. We have wondered why the symbols are so easily learned by the children. There are many points of view on this. Here is one interpretation. It is from an article from Bob Scott of the Photographic Art Department, Ruerson Polytechnical Institute, Toronto - an art teacher looking at why symbols seem to be easy for children to learn. He says, "The primary function of storing visual information by configuration is manifest in the children's drawings (where outline is more important than interior details), and also in children's ready understanding of cartoon figures as opposed to high definition photographs. It is precisely these qualities that characterize Bliss Symbols and allow for their easy assimilation by beginners in the 'new' language." Now, no one is claiming that Bliss Symbols are self evident, that when you first see a symbol you know what it means. But once you've been given the explanation of the symbol it is very easily learned and remembered. This is due in part to the many cues to the meaning of the symbol that can be seen in the symbols.

Before we introduce the symbols and discuss them in any great depth, I would like to have you take a short test to demonstrate to yourself the relative ease of learning Bliss Symbols compared to what it might be like to learn English. The test only takes a few minutes and is the best way I know to get a comparison of learning Bliss Symbols vs. what it might be like to learn English.

To try this test, you need only a blank piece of paper and a pencil. Now put the numbers 1 through 12 down the left edge of the paper and the numbers 13 through 24 down the center of the page. You are now ready to take the test.

In this test you will be seeing two sets of symbol representations, along with the English translation of them. One symbol set will be the Spence Symbols and the other will be the Bliss Symbols. The first set of symbols has been designed by Murray Spence, Assistant Co-ordinator, Special Education Programmes, North York Board of Education, in Ontario, Canada. He uses them to provide teachers of early reading programs with the experience of relating to a new medium and attempting to derive meaning from it. Each symbol represents a letter of the English alphabet; the symbols are sequenced to form words on the basis of the sound(s) each

symbol represents. The relationship between each symbol and sound is as consistent as English letter-sound relationships!

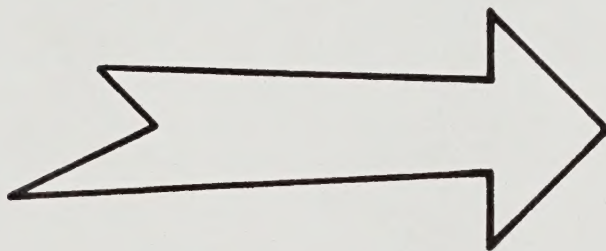
The second set of symbols are Bliss Symbols with the component parts representing meaning, either directly through a pictorial symbol, or indirectly through an arbitrary or abstract symbol.


Procedure for the test is as follows:

1. Study the Bliss Symbols for one minute, without taking notes. Look for shape-meaning correspondence.
2. Turn to the Spence Symbols and study them for one minute, without taking notes. Look for sound-shape correspondence.
3. Engage in a new and completely different activity for 10 minutes.
4. Return to the test page. Allow yourself one minute; write as many words as you can, doing the easiest ones first.
5. Tally your score from the answer page.

Study for one minute without taking notes .




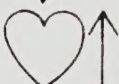
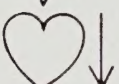


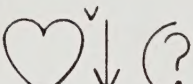
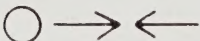


(Hint: Look for shape - meaning correspondence)





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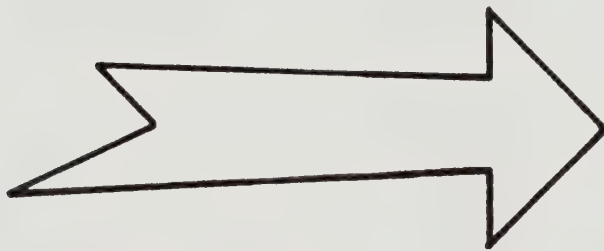
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	man
	lady
	mother
	father
	happy
	sad
	big
	little
	afraid
	hello
	home
	animal

BLISS SYMBOLS

Study for one minute without taking notes.

(Hint: Look for sound - shape correspondence.)



人 口 山	man
女 口 山 子	lady
人 子 子 子 子 子	mother
子 口 子 子 子 子	father
人 口 子 子 子	happy
人 口 山	sad
大 口 山	big
女 口 子 子 子 子	little
子 口 子 口 口 山	afraid
人 口 子 子 子	hello
人 子 山 口	home
子 山 口 人 口 子	animal

SPENCE SYMBOLS

Now break for ten minutes of unrelated activity.

After ten minutes:

Allow yourself one minute.

Write as many words as you can.

Do the easier ones first.

Your score is the total number correct.



1. ੳੳੳੳ

2. ੳੳੳੳ ੳੳੳ

3. ੳੳੳੳ ੳੳੳ

4. ੳੳੳੳ ੳੳੳ

5. ੳੳੳ ੳੳੳ

6. ੳੳੳ

7. ੳੳੳ ੳੳੳ


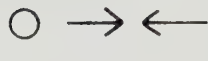








8. ੳੳੳੳੳੳੳ

9. ੳੳੳੳੳੳੳ

10. ੳੳੳੳੳੳੳ

11. ੳੳੳ

12. ੳੳੳੳੳੳੳ

13. 14. 15. 16. 17. 18. 19. 20. 21. 22. 23. 24. 

TEST PAGE

ANSWER PAGE

- | | | |
|-----------|------------|------------|
| 1. lady | 9. mother | 17. animal |
| 2. little | 10. animal | 18. sad |
| 3. hello | 11. big | 19. father |
| 4. happy | 12. father | 20. afraid |
| 5. man | 13. happy | 21. lady |
| 6. sad | 14. hello | 22. house |
| 7. home | 15. man | 23. little |
| 8. afraid | 16. big | 24. mother |

When you have completed the test consider the following:

Which symbols did you want to translate first?

Which symbols were easier to retain?

Which symbols appeared visually simpler?

Which required the least effort to analyze?

Which symbols made you think about meaning?

If your score was over 3 for the Spence Symbols, you did better than the majority of workshop attendants to whom I have given this test. If your score was under 9 for Bliss Symbols, you did more poorly than the majority of those trying this test.

Compare your experience in processing the Spence Symbols to that of the young child learning to read. (Keep in mind that the comparison is not entirely valid. The young child brings much knowledge of English letter shapes to his learning-to-read experience. He reads street signs, cereal boxes, people's names, etc., long before his formal reading instruction begins. You, too, however, bring experience of another kind to the task of reading Spence Symbols).

Allowing that the two situations differ in some ways, I hope that the contrast, for you, between learning Spence Symbols and learning Bliss Symbols provides you with an appreciation of the contrast, for the young child, between learning English words and learning Bliss Symbols.

INTRODUCTION TO BLISS SYMBOLS

The Bliss Symbol system is composed of about 100 elements. These various elements are combined to form the symbols. Bliss began with numbers and mathematical symbols which are international and added symbols he devised himself. The symbols are based upon meaning and therefore symbols which deal with a similar topic will have common components.

Let us first take a look at the symbols which represent people. The number 1 person (see below) is the child--I, me, or mine. Since symbols stand for ^{be-remen} concepts, and not specific words, the young child can use the symbol for "I" to mean "mine," the possessive form, or to mean "me," the objective form.

"You" is the second person, number 2, and it is quite apparent to each child that he or she is always number 1 in this world! That fellow who can't be seen directly is number 3. The concept of numbering persons is not as difficult as it might initially appear and our children pick it up quite readily.



person



I, me, (my)



you, (your)



she, her



he, him, (his)

The multiplication mark is used over any symbol to convert it to the plural. The children learn that symbol as "much," or "many."



much, many



we



they

The symbols for man and woman are very simple. The roof symbol denotes protection. So the woman who protects, or the woman who lives in your house, is your mother. The man who protects is your father. In Mr. Symbol Man, Mr. Bliss gives his rationale for the component parts of man and woman.



roof



man



woman



mother



father

The brother is that male person in your house who is number 2, (never number 1!) and the sister is the female number 2, (never number 1!) You will see as you look at the different symbols that some are pictorial while others are more arbitrary. ^{aggrucetis} The pictorial ones are usually introduced to the children first. After they get the idea of symbols representing meaning, more abstract symbols can be introduced.



The inverted V represents the "action" symbol. It is used over another symbol to denote action associated with that symbol and to change it into its verb form. For example, when used over a part of the body such as the mouth, it changes the meaning from "mouth" to "speak." The one children like best is when you "make action with your brain," and then you "think." We had an incident early in the program with a young child saying that she was sad. When asked why, she replied, "because my ^{marcus} guinea pig cannot think." That's the kind of insight you can get from these children.

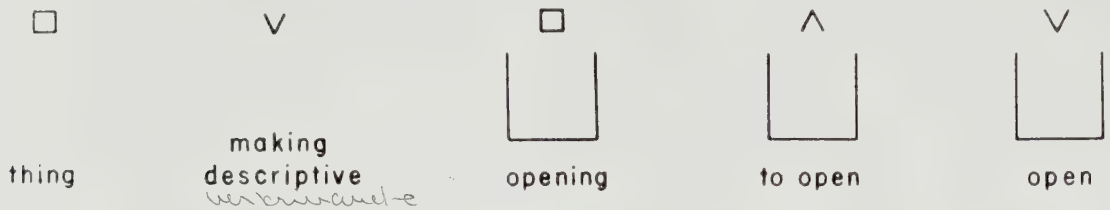


We debated on whether we should put the action sign over legs for "walking" and "going," as is suggested by Mr. Bliss in his original system, and decided that we would maintain this extended meaning even though most of our children are in wheelchairs. They do have a wheelchair, however, and they "make action with their wheelchair" when they are independently going somewhere, rather than being pushed.



There are three special indicators. The action symbol (the in-

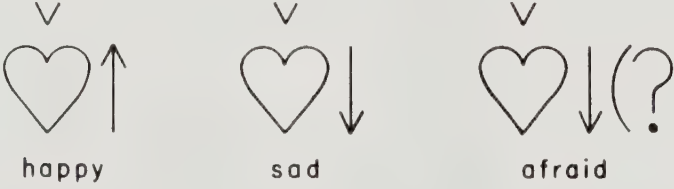
verted V) converts a symbol to a verb, The "thing" symbol (a little square over the symbol) converts a symbol to a noun. The evaluation symbol (an upright V over the symbol) is used for adjectives and adverbs. Mr. Bliss chose the shape to denote adjectives and adverbs because it is unstable and tips easily from side to side. I demonstrate with a drinking cup or an ice cream cone for the children. It will not stand stable and Bliss was saying that any evaluation is open to discussion of the person. I might say it is quite hot in this room and a lot of people might say it is quite chilly, while someone else might say it's just right. Our opinions vary back and forth and an easy way to remember the difference between the adjective and the verb is to think about that shape.



All the emotions are based upon the heart. When you make action with the heart you feel something. "To want" something involves the heart and action symbol plus the action for flame or heat (to burn with desire).

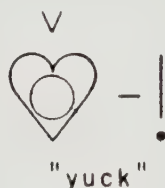


The heart is used in a lot of adjectives as well. When you are "feeling up," you're "happy;" "feeling down," you're "sad." If you are "feeling afraid" (sad about the future which is unknown), you add the symbol for future and a question mark to the symbol for "sad." If you don't know if you're "feeling up or down," you're "upset." "Excited?" Add an exclamation mark. Anger is represented by two thrusts directed towards the heart. The multiplication sign indicates much anger.

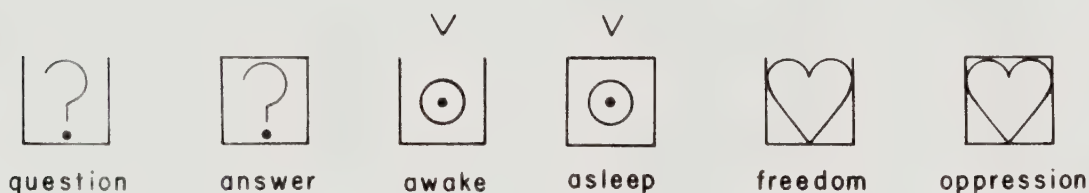




One problem we had was that of giving the child the swear word he wanted. The symbol for "feeling" and "mouth," along with the symbol for "negativeness with intensity" were chosen for this purpose. When the children are younger we translate the negative word as "yuk." If it's an older student we sort of wink when they point to it. We don't have to say it but we know what they're thinking when they point to it. We have left words off these symbols to facilitate generalization.



An "eye" symbol in the "open" symbol means "awake;" in the closed symbol, "asleep." A "question mark" in the open symbol indicates a question being asked; in the closed symbol it represents the answer. Freedom comes from being open. You're free and unrestricted. "Closed in emotions" indicates "oppression."



The accuracy in writing symbols is very important. Symbols can take on a new meaning if they're placed in a different position. The same line placed at the bottom of the space becomes the earth symbol. If it's at the top it's the sky. If you have both lines you have that space between the sky and the earth--the world. Water in this position is water in general. At the skyline, it's clouds; at the baseline and there is much of it, it's a lake. If you have two multiplication marks in front of it, you have the ocean. Many different meanings are derived by combining other symbols with the symbol for water. Water coming down in the direction of the arrow is rain. If it's in the shape of a star it is snow. Water under the sky is fog.



CONSTRUCTION OF SYMBOLS

When putting symbols together or making up a symbol the classifier comes first. For example, in the symbol for "school," the symbol for "building" comes first, and the symbols for "give" and "knowledge," which describe what kind of building it is, come after the building symbol. For teacher, it is a "person." What kind of person? A person who gives knowledge. The typewriter is a machine for writing. The elevator is a room that goes up and down. A dessert is a food that makes you happy. An exception to the classifier first rule would be when the multiplication sign is used for much, as in lake, "much water."



We have not had the difficulty in classifying that we had anticipated. We thought some children would not be able to see the symbol for animal and have it relate to all animals. Most children in our program, however, have been able to generalize in this way.

One of the things that symbols cannot do easily for the children's usage is to discriminate between a cow, horse, pig, goat or sheep. Bliss provides for this distinction by adding numbers and distinguishing body parts, but using these would add greatly to the number of symbols on a display. The general symbol for animal is more functional and versatile for the children. To indicate specific animals, descriptors can be used along with the general animal symbol. At the beginning stage we used pictures of the individual animals with words accompanying them. As the children learn how to classify things we remove the individual animals and give them the general animal symbol. If the child can give his mother the idea of animal, then from that point the child

can indicate what type of animal by giving her clues..."it's yellow, orange or brown; it's big, it's little; it starts with a D or a C or a P..." He can describe it to her using his other symbols so it isn't essential that he use up his limited board space having the exact symbols for each animal.

When looking for a new symbol we use Mr. Bliss's Semantography book. It is an excellent resource book. It has a dictionary and whenever we want a new symbol we check there first. If you don't find the symbol you want there or if you need to make up a new symbol, it is important to check with the Blissymbolics Communications Foundation in Toronto before making regular use of it. The BCF is trying to catalogue new symbols and promote standardization to facilitate communication between symbol users.

TECHNIQUES FOR EXPANDING VOCABULARY USE

The children's vocabulary has been expanded through an emphasis on homonyms, antonyms and synonyms. Using these techniques, it is possible to give the children the capability of communicating on the greatest variety of topics even though their physical abilities greatly restrict the number of symbols which they can point to. Teachers in the primary classes are making use of these terms. They are teaching the children the meaning of the terms and how these strategies can be used to talk about things for which there are no symbols on their displays. An example that a teacher used in one primary class was to take the symbol for vehicle, "car," and have the children devise a symbol for "tow truck." The child is asked to think about things that would describe the vehicle classifier so that others could figure out what type of vehicle he was trying to talk about. Here is where there is a golden opportunity to become aware of the concepts that the children have. These are some of the things that the children said about the tow truck: "My uncle had one once." "It has six wheels." "It goes to a garage." "It carries cars." "It's big." "I like it." "It's a toy." To help the children determine which of these concepts would best convey the meaning of "tow truck" to someone else, the teacher had them decide what were the essential characteristics that other people would need to know in order to understand what the child was trying to communicate. She went through the various descriptions and said "Is that going to help someone else know what you mean? Will it help to know that your uncle has one? Would it help to know it is a toy? Would it help to know it carries cars or that it goes to a garage?" The children selected the ones they thought were important. They were the ones that then became part of that class's tow truck symbol.

ROLE OF THE TEACHER IN SYMBOL USE

When the instructor is working with Bliss Symbols we feel he has the responsibility to set a model for the children. One of the disadvantages of the system is that the children have so few models in their

environment for them to emulate. We feel that one responsibility of the instructor is, therefore, to know the system and know its potential. Hopefully she can be a little ahead in knowing what the system is capable of but she is never going to be ahead of the child in what he starts to do with it because the children end up being more creative than we are.

The teacher has quite a hard role; she wants to encourage the child to be creative but she still wants to give him some idea of order, syntax, and how to clarify his ideas. Our teachers use symbols in many ways: on the blackboards, in messages to other children, in worksheet instructions, through letters and through little books. The instructors go through various levels in responding to a child's symbol output. At the very beginning they ensure that the child's response is reinforced. To check if we have the right meaning, we confirm everything. When a child points to a symbol we verbalize the meaning and we repeat it. But, as soon as we know that the children know the meanings, we stop doing this. We wait until the child has indicated all the symbols, and then we give him the full sentence. This way we hope that the child is seeing how we are able to translate the symbols into a total sentence or a total idea. If we misunderstand we ask the child to tell us what symbol was misinterpreted and we go back to that part of the sentence and try to clarify it. It is essential for me when I am relating with the symbol children to write down what they are saying. I find it hard to retain 8 or 10 symbols in sequence. I like to get them all down and from that whole unit I get the message.

With some children we get to the level where the child "says" something and we just respond. This is the nicest of all. The child puts together a sentence and we respond with something like, "Oh, you're going home. Great! When are you leaving?" It is the most gratifying experience of all to be able to engage in normal conversation.

Regarding the model of symbol output presented by those communicating with the children, for the children who are now pointing, I think it is fairly straightforward a decision (certainly it has been at our Centre), to use in general the model of English word order. Teachers use it when writing on the blackboard or writing symbol messages, and have asked us to use it as an example for the child. We are not drilling them in it, however; we're not forcing it upon them. We hope it will become within their area of confidence but we don't want the children to feel that they have to use it all the time. And, of course, most of the the time, people are speaking to the children. The presentation of symbol models has to be planned--for the major part of the child's input is received through the speech of those with whom he relates.

ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF BLISS SYMBOLS

Through our program we've been able to isolate a few of the advantages and disadvantages of the Bliss Symbols. As with any new program it is open to constant inspection and change, but on the whole we feel that our program has had a positive impact.

One of the principal advantages of the Bliss Symbols is that they are easily learned. This is in fact one of the principal reasons why we have gone to the Bliss Symbols. Another very important advantage of the symbols is that they seem to be more generalizable. When the children only have a limited number of words or symbols which they can fit on their tray and point to, this becomes very important. The children are able to use the Bliss Symbols to communicate on a much wider variety of topics than with an equivalent number of words. Another advantage is that the symbols contribute to the child's total development, whether it is social, emotional...his self-image. The children see themselves as capable, active persons, able to become involved in their world.

The attitude of other people, on the whole, becomes positive. Many come to the children to see what they are doing. They are impressed that these symbols--that appear to an adult at the beginning to be difficult--are being handled capably by the children. It changes the concept they have of the children's intellectual capabilities. They begin to realize that the thinking child can be a creative child. The children certainly get more attention directed toward them.

There are some children who have visual difficulties. In this case it is a much more difficult teaching task, but it seems to be the minority of the children who have these severe visual problems. They do occur, however, and special displays and teaching procedures must be developed to accommodate the special needs of these children.

Generally, most of our children have been able to learn the symbols quite readily. It has certainly made learning to read easier. We tested six of the children (who had received no intensive reading program) at the end of the third year. Three of the children had learned 70% of the sight words (words printed under the symbols) in the 400-symbol set. They had lived with these words in print, they had been looking at them, and finding their own way of recognizing those words. These words were then used as a base for their sight vocabulary. Within the reading program, we are transferring from symbols to words by gradually increasing the number of words in symbol sentences. First the children read Bliss Symbols; gradually they begin to read conventional orthography.

And now for some of the disadvantages. One of the principal disadvantages of teaching a child with Bliss Symbols is that they are not used by other people in their environment. This causes a problem in

providing adequate models for the children. They don't see the adults around them using the symbols for everyday communication so it is hard for them to find the easiest and quickest way to do things. They have to develop skills themselves and from each other. This is a problem which is also faced by children on wordboards in that the people around them generally communicate with a much different and larger vocabulary set than the children have on their wordboards. Thus, the children may have difficulty in picking out the easiest and quickest way to express themselves with the limited word set they have at their disposal. The problem of providing a model can appear with any different symbol system but perhaps is even more evident with the Bliss system.

Some people feel threatened by the symbol system. But there are very few people who over time don't come to accept it. For some parents the introduction of symbols--and this would hold true for wordboards and any alternative communication system--is seen as a confirmation that the child will never develop speech. We had one child who was withdrawn from our program because the parents wanted to place a complete emphasis on speech and speech training. No alternative communication system was acceptable to them, and we had to abide by the parent's decision.

Another disadvantage to the Bliss Symbols is that there is presently no way to provide the children with a printout. Unlike aids which use the standard words and can therefore use standard strip printers, etc., aids which are used with Bliss Symbols do not have any printout. Without such a printout the teacher must wait--and have the entire class wait--for the child to get into position to point to the symbols. With a printout the child could be preparing an answer while the other children were giving their answers. The teacher could then respond to the child in a normal fashion. [Editor's note: Research into the development of a printout capability for the Bliss system aid is presently being done at the University of Wisconsin under the auspices of the Blissymbolics Communication Foundation, Toronto.]

Another disadvantage of the Bliss Symbols, that is also common to communication boards, is that we don't have as much eye contact as we would like. We're dealing with a communication board that is in front of the child, and he must therefore look down. It doesn't mean that we don't look at the children and they don't look up when we communicate, but the communication board just doesn't provide as much eye contact as we would ideally like to have.

We developed our program because we wanted the young non-speaking physically handicapped child to be able to do what the typical young child does with speech; he plays with words, questions persistently, elaborates simple things into long narratives, comments with approval on his own behavior and criticizes the behavior of others.

Symbols don't provide the perfect substitute for speech, but they

certainly do provide many of the experiences that speech does. We wanted something that would be easily learned and automatized. Symbols have this capability. The child can get going with what he wants to say and think about meanings rather than having to devote time and energy to remembering what a word looks like and what it means. The child is free to communicate.

SUMMARY

In this short presentation I tried to give you a basic introduction to the symbols and to illustrate some of the reasons why we have implemented the system with the children in our Centre. A little later, in the Results section of the workshop we will be discussing further how we have applied these symbols at the Centre. For more specific information on the symbol system you should consult the book, Semantography, or write to the Blissymbolics Communication Foundation, 862 Eglinton Avenue East, Toronto M4G 2L1, Ontario, Canada. A very interesting and enjoyable film is also available documenting Mr. Bliss and his symbols. In the film there is a very good 20-minute segment showing the use of the symbols with some of the children at the Crippled Children's Centre. The film, titled Mr. Symbol Man, is available from the National Film Board in Canada.

